

THE CRUCIFIXION ECLIPSE

By Chick Pallotta

As Jesus Christ was dying on the Cross, the light of the afternoon sun was darkened for three hours. Was this, this total eclipse of the sun, a sign from Heaven validating His claim of being the Son of God? Did the prophecies foretell this singular eclipse? Further, was it a natural or supernatural phenomenon? Is there corroborating evidence to substantiate the biblical accounts? Did this celestial wonder have symbolic meaning? Finally, is there any conclusion which may be drawn from it?

Older translations of the New Testament say that it happened from the sixth until the ninth hour. And since the hours of the Jewish day were counted from sunrise, the time of its occurrence would correspond to around 12 noon to 3 p.m. Three Gospel writers have in fact testified to it:

"From noon onward, there was darkness over the whole land until midafternoon."---Matthew 27:45

"When noon came, darkness fell on the whole countryside and lasted until midafternoon."---Mark 15:33

"It was now around midday, and darkness came over the whole land until midafternoon with an eclipse of the sun."---Luke 23:44¹

As to the particular relevance of this eclipse to the fulfillment of the sacred prophecies, there are several Old Testament passages cited by the "Fathers of the Church,"² which they say, make reference to it. Here are two notable ones. Some eight centuries prior to the event at Calvary the prophet Amos wrote:

"On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun set at midday and cover the earth with darkness in broad daylight."---Amos 8:9

In the Book of Joel composed about 400 B.C. it is also written:

"And I will work wonders in the heavens and on the earth . . . the sun will be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, at the coming of the day of the Lord, the great and terrible day."---Joel 3:3-4

The first pope, Peter, declared the words of Joel fulfilled just fifty-two days after the Crucifixion. Peter so stated this in the preface of his address to the people in Acts 2:16-21 after the Holy Spirit's descent on the morning of Pentecost. The assembly, presumed eyewitnesses also to the sun's eerie and mysterious disappearance, undoubtedly understood that the prophecy had, indeed, come to pass.

But was the timing of this eclipse at the Crucifixion merely a coincidence? Or is there any evidence to indicate that this solar eclipse had violated physical law, that somehow it took place when it wasn't supposed to?

NASA physicist Fred Espanak remarks, "The probability of witnessing a total solar eclipse from any given place on the planet is about once every 375 years." The odds then are "astronomical" for a total eclipse of the sun to have occurred by chance over Jerusalem during Christ's Crucifixion.

Now to the issue of a solar eclipse occurring unexpectedly. "According to the laws of science," says Sandra Kitt, manager of library services at the Richard S. Perkin Library of the Hayden Planetarium in New York City, "a solar eclipse occurs when the moon comes directly between the sun and the earth and is in a straight line with both. And this can happen *only* at the time of a *new* moon." (see illustration)

However, on the night of the Crucifixion of Jesus the moon was *full*—approximately fourteen days and eighteen hours away from a new phase—proceeding in orbit on the *opposite* side of the earth. We know this with certainty for, in accordance with Jewish law, this Friday—the 14th day of the Jewish month Nisan (corresponding to March/April on our calendar)—the Passover was celebrated and this *always* occurs at the time of the *full* moon. The conditions, therefore, for an eclipse of the sun to occur did not exist! It was the absolute will of God that when the designated time arrived this astonishing departure from the norm would miraculously take place. Fittingly, the head of the apostles, exercising his supreme teaching authority, publicly and boldly pronounced it as so.

The Crucifixion eclipse had at least two other supernatural characteristics: namely, it was *total from the very beginning* and remained total *for three hours!* Although the English translation of the New Testament misses these finer points, the word *egheneto*³ from the original Greek renders the meaning that the darkness happened "suddenly." By contrast, in an ordinary eclipse of the sun, the process of the moon covering the sun is a gradual one. When darkness does reach its peak, it remains that way usually for a few minutes but never longer than 7 1/2 minutes.

Concerning the significance of this eclipse, one commentator, St. John Chrysostom (344-407 A.D.), bishop, "Father of the Church" and "Doctor of the Church," says in a sermon on the Passion that "Creation could not bear the indignities inflicted upon the Creator."⁴ Similarly, from Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen comes this insight:

"From twelve o'clock until three o'clock there was an unearthly darkness that fell over the land, for nature, in sympathy with its Creator, refused to shed its light upon the crime of deicide. Mankind, having condemned the Light of the World, now lost the cosmic symbol of that Light, the sun. At Bethlehem, where He was born at midnight, the heavens were suddenly filled with light; at Calvary, when He entered into the ignominy of His Crucifixion at midday, the heavens were bereaved of light."⁵

One of the most important, non-biblical documents of antiquity to verify this dramatic solar eclipse is "The Report of Pontius Pilate, Procurator of Judea."⁶ This official, over one-thousand word report was written by Pontius Pilate and sent to the Emperor Tiberius in Rome. It contains a descriptive account of the miracles of Jesus and the mysterious events surrounding His Crucifixion. A second Greek translation of the lost original confirms:

"And when he had been crucified, there was darkness over the whole earth, the sun having been completely hidden, and the heaven appearing dark though it was day, so that the stars appeared, but had at the same time their brightness darkened, as I suppose your reverence is not ignorant of, because in all the world they lighted lamps from the sixth hour until evening. And the moon, being like blood, did not shine the whole night, and yet she happened to be at the full."⁷

In about the year 200 A.D. Tertullian, a renowned Christian jurist and writer, appealed to the Romans with great confidence concerning this 'Report of Pilate' stating, "Yet you have this disappearance of the sun all over the world related in your own archives."⁸

Whether or not this eclipse was seen literally "all over the world" is not known. For, the expression used in the original Greek could also be translated to mean "over the whole land" or "over the whole region." Some theologians speculate that this solar wonder veiled only Jerusalem and its vicinity, or, at most, over the whole of Judea. Others surmise that it extended over the entire hemisphere reached by the sun's rays. To this day, this too remains a mystery. It seems probable though that navigators and astronomers at the time would have chronicled such a unique and intriguing spectacle.

We conclude now by summarizing the findings: 1) There occurred before the death of Christ an eclipse of the sun lasting three hours at totality. 2) This sudden and unexpected eclipse on that first Good Friday clearly operated outside the laws of science. 3) This solar eclipse fulfilled biblical prophecies written centuries before. 4) The New Testament records that this solar darkening was seen by numerous and credible witnesses. 5) Pontius Pilate confirmed in his official report that this extraordinary eclipse, indeed, took place at the time of the *full* moon. 6) Tertullian, in about the year 200 A.D., strongly argued that the corroborating Pilate manuscript was still in existence and was housed in the Roman archives. Thus, the body of evidence presented, unmistakably demonstrates that the Crucifixion eclipse was a supernatural sign from God validating Christ's claim of being the promised Messiah and Son of the Living God.

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Editor's note: Chick Pallotta is director of the Marian Media Apostolate. He welcomes any information on the existence of any manuscript or documentation which relates to the geographical extent of this solar eclipse. Write: 2295 East First Street, Brooklyn, New York 11223-5143 (USA). Telephone: (718) 375-1245.

END NOTES

¹This 44th verse of the 23rd Chapter of St. Luke is part of the long Gospel narrative (Chapter 22:14 through Chapter 23:56) proclaimed on Passion (Palm) Sunday "C" cycle years---1995, 1998, 2001 etc. Liturgical years run in three-year cycles: A, B and C.

²"Fathers of the Church" is a title given to certain early Christian writers who were very close to apostolic sources. According to present usage those writers are called "Fathers" who have the four characteristics of antiquity, orthodoxy, sanctity and approbation of the Church.

³This same verb form *egheto* meaning "was made or became" is used in John 1:14 "The Word was made flesh." Just as the Incarnation happened "the moment" the Blessed Virgin Mary gave Her consent, in a like manner, the sun "suddenly" was made or became dark. The source consulted was:

Augustinus Merk, S.J., editor, *Novum Testamentum Graece Et Latine* (Sumptibus Pontificii Instituti Biblici, Romae, 1951) Matthew 27:45 p. 104; Mark 15:33 p. 181; Luke 23:44 p. 298; John 1:14 p. 307.

⁴Fr. James Groenings, S.J., *The Passion of Jesus and its Hidden Meaning*, Sixth Revised Edition (TAN Books and Publishers, Inc., Rockford, Illinois, copyright 1900 by Joseph Gummersbach) p. 381.

⁵Most Rev. Fulton J. Sheen, Ph.D., D.D., *Life of Christ* (Doubleday, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., New York, New York; a reprint of the 1958 edition published by McGraw-Hill, New York; copyright 1958, 1977 by Fulton J. Sheen) p. 378.

⁶It was Pilate's obligation to inform Rome of this whole matter. Not to do so would have constituted a dereliction of duty on his part. Neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a pagan, Pilate had absolutely nothing to gain to exaggerate or to fabricate the story.

⁷The Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D., and James Donaldson, LL.D., editors, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers ---Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, Volume VIII*, American reprint of the Edinburgh Edition (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1926) pp. 462-463.

⁸Roy Joseph Deferrari, editorial board director of The Catholic University of America, *The Fathers of the Church---a new translation, Volume 10, Tertullian, Apologetical Works* founded by Ludwig Schopp (Fathers of the Church, Inc., New York, 1950) p. 65.

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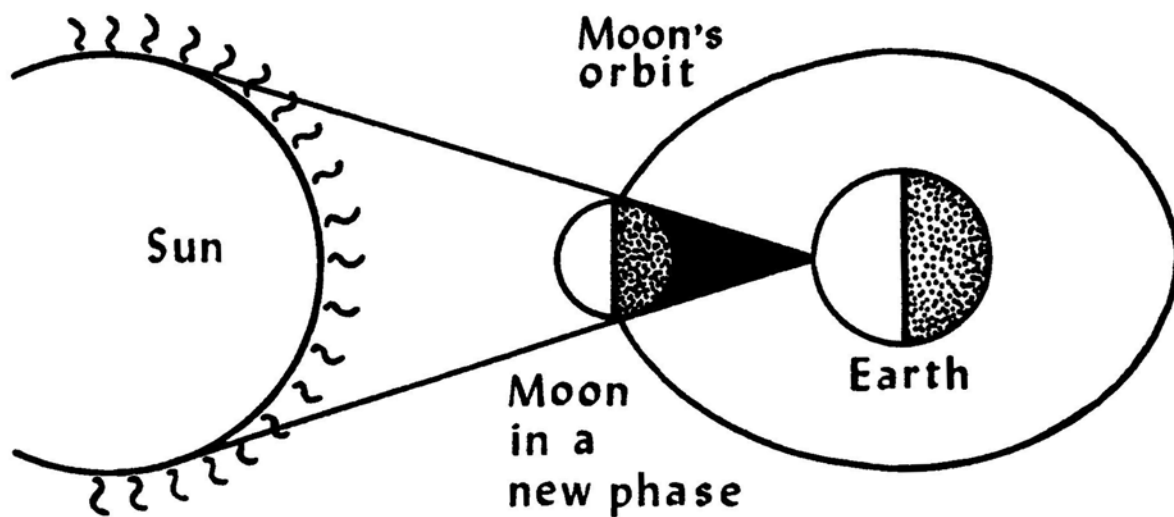
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Illustrated by Rosemary Volpe

(not scaled to size)

ECLIPSE OF THE SUN

Alignment of the sun, moon and earth during an eclipse of the sun. The moon, blocking out the light of the sun, casts its shadow on the earth. This happens *only* at the time of a *new* moon, a phase when the side of the moon facing us is darkened and, therefore, not in view.

At the Crucifixion, the *full* moon of the Passover celebration was on the *opposite* side of the earth.

THE REPORT OF PONTIUS PILATE, PROCURATOR OF JUDÆA,

SENT TO ROME TO TIBERIUS CÆSAR.

SECOND GREEK FORM.

To the most mighty, venerable, awful, most divine, the august, — Pilatus Pontius, the governor of the East: I have to report to thy reverence, through this writing of mine, being seized with great trembling and fear, O most mighty emperor, the conjuncture of the present times, as the end of these things has shown. For while I, my lord, according to the commandment of thy clemency, was discharging the duties of my government, which is one of the cities of the East, Jerusalem by name, in which is built the temple of the Jewish nation, all the multitude of the Jews came together, and delivered to me a certain man named Jesus, bringing against him many and groundless charges; and they were not able to convict him in anything. And one heresy of theirs against him was, that he said that the Sabbath was not their right rest. And that man wrought many cures, in addition to good works. He made the blind see; he cleansed lepers; he raised the dead; he healed paralytics who could not move at all, except that they only had their voice, and the joining of their bones; and he gave them the power of walking about and running, commanding *them* by a single word. And another mightier work he did, which was strange even with our gods: he raised up a dead man, Lazarus, who had been dead four days, by a single word ordering the dead man to be raised, although his body was already corrupted by the worms that grow in wounds; and that ill-smelling body lying in the tomb he ordered to run; and as a bridegroom from the bridal chamber, so he came forth out of the tomb, filled with exceeding fragrance. And some that were cruelly vexed by demons, and had their dwellings in deserts, and ate the flesh of their own limbs, and lived along with reptiles and wild beasts, he made to be dwellers in cities in their own houses, and by a word he rendered them sound-minded; and he made those that

were troubled by unclean spirits to be intelligent and reputable; and sending away the demons in them into a herd of swine, he suffocated them in the sea. Another man, again, who had a withered hand, and lived in sorrow, and had not even the half of his body sound, he rendered sound by a single word. And a woman that had a flow of blood for many years, so that, in consequence of the flowing of her blood, all the joinings of her bones appeared, and were transparent like glass; and assuredly all the physicians had left her without hope, and had not cleansed her, for there was not in her a single hope of health: once, then, as Jesus was passing by, she took hold of the fringe of his clothes behind, and that same hour the power of her body was completely restored, and she became whole, as if nothing were the matter with her, and she began to run swiftly to her own city Paneas.¹

And these things indeed were so. And the Jews gave information that Jesus did these things on the Sabbath. And I also ascertained that the miracles done by him were greater than any which the gods whom we worship could do.

Him then Herod and Archelaus and Philip, and Annas and Caiaphas, with all the people, delivered to me to try him. And as many were exciting an insurrection against me, I ordered him to be crucified.

And when he had been crucified, there was darkness over the whole earth, the sun having been completely hidden, and the heaven appearing dark though it was day, so that the stars appeared, but had at the same time their brightness darkened, as I suppose your reverence is not ignorant of, because in all the world they lighted lamps from the sixth hour until evening. And the moon, being like blood, did not shine the whole night, and yet she happened to be at

¹ This is a conjecture of Thilo's. The MSS. have *Spania*.

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THE REPORT OF PILATE.

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the full. And the stars also, and Orion, made a lament about the Jews, on account of the wickedness that had been done by them.²

And on the first of the week, about the third hour of the night, the sun was seen such as it had never at any time shone, and all the heaven was lighted up. And as lightnings come on in winter, so majestic men of indescribable splendour of dress and of glory appeared in the air, and an innumerable multitude of angels crying out, and saying: Glory in the highest to God, and on earth peace, among men goodwill: come up out of Hades, ye who have been kept in slavery in the underground regions of Hades. And at their voice all the mountains and hills were shaken, and the rocks were burst asunder; and great chasms were made in the earth, so that also what was in the abyss appeared.

And there were seen in that terror dead men

² Instead of this last sentence, one of the MSS. has: And the whole world was shaken by unspeakable miracles, and all the creation was like to be swallowed up by the lower regions; so that also the sanctuary of their temple was rent from top to bottom. And again there was thunder, and a mighty noise from heaven, so that all our land shook and trembled. Another: And there began to be earthquakes in the hour in which the nails were fixed in Jesus' hands and feet, until evening.

raised up,³ as the Jews that saw them said: We have seen Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the twelve patriarchs, that died two thousand five hundred years ago; and we have seen Noah manifestly in the body. And all the multitude walked about, and sang praises to God with a loud voice, saying: The Lord our God that has risen from the dead has brought to life all the dead, and has plundered Hades, and put him to death.

All that night therefore, my lord, O king, the light ceased not. And many of the Jews died, and were engulfed and swallowed up in the chasms in that night, so that not even their bodies appeared. Those, I say, of the Jews suffered that had spoken against Jesus. And one synagogue was left in Jerusalem, since all those synagogues that had been against Jesus were engulfed.

From that fear, then, being in perplexity, and seized with much trembling, at that same hour I ordered what had been done by them all to be written; and I have reported it to thy mightiness.

³ One MS. adds: To the number of five hundred.